

Someone was having a nightmare.

Wickerbottom looked up from her book, searching for the source of the sound. That nice young woman and her hirsute friend were prone to nightmares; Wickerbottom had found that they were liable to become aggressive if awakened too abruptly.

The sounds she heard at the present time were coming from that muscled fellow they had found in the marsh yesterday. Wickerbottom approached and found him sitting up, looking into the shadows and whimpering.

Wickerbottom stood by him and cleared her throat, which startled him somewhat. "Are you all right, Mr. Wolfgang?"

"I do not like scary dark!" His eyes were those of a frightened puppy.

"I see... nyctophobia." How at odds with his physical perfection and boastfulness. "There is nothing in the dark that can hurt you, dear." At the time, that was what she believed to be true. "Try to calm yourself. You are injured and need your rest." A very reasonable speech, but it seemed to have calmed him not at all. His thick, heavy limbs trembled like blades of grass. Wickerbottom would normally offer him a cup of tea but there was no tea at hand.

Wolfgang started in alarm, looking at something by Wickerbottom's side. She turned to discover round gray eyes shining in the firelight.

"Hey, Wolfgang," Willow whispered. "Had a bad dream?"

"Wolfgang doesn't like dark," Wolfgang said.

"Yeah, dark's no good." The young lady could be quite brusque, but she was gentle now. "Hey, I got someone here you'd like to meet, I bet!" She produced the tattered bear that she kept at her bedside. "This is Bernie! Wanna borrow him? He'll feel safe with you."

"I will guard tiny bear!" Wolfgang took the bear and hugged it, disregarding its battered and filthy state. "Alright!" Willow whispered, slipping back to her own hearth and her companion.

Wolfgang lay down, as at peace now as was the blonde child who slept near him, who was glacially calm in the dark and had not stirred an eyelash throughout the conversation.

"What was that?" Wickerbottom heard. That was Willow's gentleman friend, Mr. Higgsbury. He still sounded quite weak. The poisonous meat he had been consuming had come near to making an end of him, the poor fool.

"The big guy was a little shaky," Willow answered. "Scared of the dark, I guess."

"Wow, really? What's he have to worry about? He's huge!" This was followed by a soft thud and a noise of reproachful surprise, and Wickerbottom deduced that Willow had struck him.

"If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleas'd me, complexions that lik'd me, and breaths that I defied not; and, I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell."

She closed the book with an audible snap. The good little children who had been listening with attention to the story were unfazed. Mr. Higgsbury, sitting in the back making a useless half-attempt to chaperone, had fallen asleep with his back against a tree- the sound of the book closing started him awake.

The children looked rather solemn. Perhaps they had not understood the humor? "I do hope you enjoyed it," Wickerbottom said.

Wendy shrugged slightly. "I prefer his tragedies, but it was an effective reading."

Higgsbury was already dozing again. He had supposedly had a classical education but it did not seem to have taken root if he could not appreciate Shakespeare.

Webber sniffled and lowered his head. Wickerbottom leaned forward. The poor child would not meet her gaze. "What seems to be the trouble, young man?"

"Nothing," he said, "only- mum and dad used to read to me, is all. We miss them sometimes."

The poor mite! "Oh dear." Wickerbottom set the book aside and patted her knees. "Come here."

He hesitated at first, but before she could ask again he did come to her. She folded him onto her lap and stroked his dear head. She did not look up until she heard Wendy speak in a polite tone: "I am beyond comforting, Mr. Higgsbury, but thank you."

Wendy and Higgsbury were sitting a few feet apart, him viewing her ruefully. Whatever had passed between them Wickerbottom had missed it. Wendy looked directly at Webber then and said: "If it is any help, at least your parents cannot see what's become of you."

She could not possibly intend such cruelty.

She continued: "I doubt your current state would make them happy." She was trying to say that Webber's parents had been spared the sight of his deformity. If she did not understand how wrong it was to say that at this moment, then how could she be made to understand? She did not mean to be cruel- she was a child.

Webber's eyes were distant. "It's difficult," Wendy said, "seeing someone change, and being unable-" She must be thinking of her sister. "I've just upset you. Never mind." She got up abruptly and left into the undergrowth, with Higgsbury following her. That seemed as if it must end badly, but Wickerbottom could hardly leave Webber at the moment, nor did it seem wise to take him with her. There was no telling what else Wendy might say to him.

"Is Wendy going to be all right?" Webber asked.

It was rare that Wickerbottom was asked a question that she had no answer to.

“Are you okay, dear?” she asked. How sweet of him, to feel concerned for the girl who had no doubt hurt him dreadfully with her words.

“I suppose so. Do you think she’s right, that my mum and dad wouldn’t want to see me anymore?”

“I- err-” Terrible as it was, that was a possibility under the circumstances. “Surely not. No, surely not, dear. I’m certain your parents love you far too much to let that-” Someone was approaching. Perhaps it was Higgsbury with Wendy. That would partially be a relief- she didn’t like to think of what nonsense he might be telling her. And yet, she did not want Wendy to say anything else.

The sounds of approach were made by Wolfgang, who now appeared in the clearing. There was a pickaxe in one of his hands, a sack full of rocks dangling from the other. “Hello, book lady!” Wolfgang came to a dead halt, eyes fixing on Webber. “Spider boy is sad?”

“He is a touch homesick,” Wickerbottom explained.

Wolfgang threw aside the things he had gathered. “Spider boy should not be sad!” He snatched the child off of Wickerbottom’s lap quite before she could react, and tossed him in the air, a dangerous act that caused Webber to giggle. “Wolfgang will cheer you up!” He tousled Webber’s fur and placed the child high up in the tree Higgsbury had been dozing against just before the incident.

“That’s rather risky,” Wickerbottom said. But she could not reach Webber up there to take him down and Wolfgang was paying her no mind.

“Hup!” said Wolfgang, tossing the pickaxe and balancing it on end on his nose.

“Wow!” said Webber.

Wolfgang bent down, affixed his moustache to the bag of rocks and lifted it thus, dangling from his facial hair. Webber clapped and grinned.

“Spider boy is no longer sad. Wolfgang is happy!” Wolfgang set Webber gently down on the ground, collected his things and strolled off.

Webber turned to Wickerbottom with all of his eyes aglow. “We could balance four things on these at once if we learned,” he said, indicating the spider legs dangling from his head.

“Yes, dear. You ought to try. With light items, of course, nothing too heavy!”

Webber appeared to have forgotten his troubles. Wolfgang was such a nice man.

Higgsbury traced and re-traced the figures on the wall, muttering under his breath. His eyes were dull, his hands trembled.

Willow had only muttered that he was ‘acting weird’ that morning. At first glance the behavior had seemed normal to Wickerbottom, but then she had noticed the unusual repetition.

“What are you working on, dear?” she asked, having now observed for several minutes without the fellow acknowledging her presence.

“Nothing. How can I work on anything when nothing works?” The figures he was tracing were of a fairly short equation, though whether one of mathematics, chemistry or physics she could not quite tell. His handwriting was deplorable.

“If a and c share a property,” said Higgsbury, “and b and c share the same property, then a and b are meaningless specks screaming into the Void! Rate equals distance divided by the time it takes a swarm of ants to clean the flesh off my face. A carbon atom triple-bonded to a nitrogen atom signifies that we will all die here and no one will ever know where we've gone-”

She took hold of his shoulders. “Snap out of it, man! This way lies madness!”

His frame was light and bony. “Why do we even try any longer, Wickerbottom?” he asked in a melancholy tone. “Where are we going to publish our results with no journals? Perhaps I’ll start a journal, and you’ll read it, and you and the things underground can discuss my methods-”

“You are talking nonsense,” said Wickerbottom. “Your mind is troubled.”

Higgsbury pointed at the wall of figures he'd drawn. "Physics don't work anymore! Matter and energy can be destroyed! Objects fall at unequal speeds! My clothing doesn't wear out but my stone tools do! Why?"

"You must simply come to terms with the fact that things are different in different worlds!"

"I don't like this world!"

"I understand, but-"

"I gotta get out of here!"

"Mr. Higgsbury?"

Wickerbottom's head turned. Webber had appeared in the mouth of the tent.

"Please go off and play, Webber," said Wickerbottom. "Mr. Higgsbury is not well."

But Webber came closer. "Oh! Do you miss your mum and dad too?"

Higgsbury took a deep breath and his eyes came into focus. "Me? Ah- my parents?" He gave Webber a shaky smile. "No, Webber, I miss other things."

"Like what?"

Wickerbottom was prepared to head off some foolish outburst but Higgsbury said: "Indoor plumbing."

Webber crept closer and took the man's limp hand into a tiny claw. "I miss lots of stuff too, but I suppose I'll miss this place after I get home. There are nice things about here. Where did you used to live?"

Higgsbury began to speak in a tumbled rush. "Maine, near the sea. I'd get awful cold in winter and from my laboratory I could hear crows and smell the pine forest. Sometimes I think I'm still there but then I wake up and I'm not."

"I lived out in the country," Webber said. "The grass smelled nice in the sun and I'd chase bunnies and pick flowers to make flower chains for Mum."

"I used to pick berries in the woods when I was hungry and didn't want to go to the store," said Higgsbury with a distant look in his eyes. "Come to think of it, those bushes might have belonged to someone."

"Some things aren't so different here" said Webber in the most reasonable tone.

"I guess not."

"We're all still the same people!" Webber pointed out. Wickerbottom wondered how much of Higgsbury's breakdown he had overheard and understood. "Even if we changed a little bit, we're not different on the inside."

"You're right, Webber. Out of the mouths of babes. And bugs." Higgsbury sniffled and said: "You're a good kid."

"Thanks!" said Webber with a smile.

Wickerbottom crept behind him and began to surreptitiously destroy the wall of madness.

“Go ahead, I was done with that,” said Higgsbury without looking round to see what she was doing. He ruffled the fur on Webber’s head.

“Hello?” That was Willow’s voice.

Wickerbottom looked up from poking the fire to see Willow, Higgsbury, Wolfgang and Webber all standing in a neat row. Oh dear, they must have destroyed something.

“What is it, dears?” she asked.

Higgsbury cleared his throat. “Would you care to come with us for a moment?” He looked quite self-important and Wickerbottom revised her assessment. He had invented something, and wanted an audience.

“Book lady must see something!” Wolfgang added. Perhaps this invention had been successful.

“It’s not gross,” said Webber.

“Don’t read too much into it, just come with us,” said Higgsbury, now looking even more pleased with himself than before. They all looked pleased with themselves, for that matter.

Willow took Wickerbottom’s hand. “Sheesh! We don’t got all day!”

Wickerbottom itched to correct her grammar, but she suspected that Willow was doing it purposefully for effect.

Willow led her away down the path. The whole group followed, giving Wickerbottom anticipatory glances. They led her to an odd lean-to structure that they had constructed just off the main path. A sort of desk or table was out in front of it.

Wickerbottom peered into the structure. Inside were roughly-built shelves.

No, bookcases. There was a sign on the desk out front: Reference desk. And inside, another sign: Please Be Quiet In The Library. They had made all of this for her.

“It was my idea!” Webber chirped.

Higgsbury was quivering with pride. “I drew up blueprints!”

“I fixed the blueprints!” Willow said, swinging Wickerbottom’s hand back and forth.

“Wolfgang carried tiny book shelves into little library!” Wolfgang boomed.

“You’ll have to stock the shelves,” Higgsbury said.

“You have built me a library” said Wickerbottom. Her eyes grew misty.

Willow nudged her. “Don’t cry or anything, just say thank you.”

Wolfgang threw his arms out. “Group hug!”

Wickerbottom submitted to the crush of bodies. Dear friends. Dear, dear friends.